1: Honigmann E-5 (1943-1945) 1949 ND12 Nahane ND12

SETTING

THE KASKA AREA

THE fifteen thousand square miles constituting the intermontane region occupied by the Kaska Indians west of the Rocky Mountains are divided between uninhabited mountainous terrain visited for hunting and trapping, and wide, rolling river valleys in which a sparsely distributed population carries on the bulk of its activities. Running away from these river valleys the country becomes increasingly hilly as it proceeds toward the eastern Rocky Mountains and the western Cordillera (Fig. 1). North of Frances Lake and south of Dease Lake these mountain systems come close together to provide the natural frontiers of the Kaska area. About halfway up Dease River from Lower Post, an offshoot of the Cordillera—the Cassiar Mountains—transects the country from northwest to southeast. Other minor ranges, including the Simpson Mountains, traverse the region between Frances Lake, on the north, and the Liard River, on the south.

The mountains provide sources for the numerous rivers and creeks that drain the country. All of these waters flow into the Liard River, which empties into the Mackenzie, and, eventually, reach the Arctic Ocean. The rivers are generally fast and shallow and marked by many sloughs. Their crooked courses are interrupted by numerous places where the current is swift and turbulent and by several narrow canyons which are impassable. A number of small lakes are also scattered throughout the area.

The climate of the country alternates between hot summer days with cool evenings, and cold winters in which the temperature hovers around twenty degrees below zero and even reaches sixty or seventy degrees below. Frosts set in around the middle of August and by early September the few deciduous trees have lost their color. Several weeks of intermittent rainfall can be expected after the first of September. When this period ends, the willows and poplars are free of leaves. By late October the rivers run with slush, small lakes and sloughs are frozen, and ice is beginning to form along the shores of the larger streams. Dry snow falls from the middle of October. After the middle of November even the larger rivers are covered with ice except for a few stretches of swift, open water. Winter has set in. In the Upper Liard area snow reaches a depth of fifteen inches by Christmas and three or four feet by the end of January. Around the beginning of March the dry, powdery snow of winter becomes moist under the warmer sun and the prevailing westerly wind (the Chinook), and the surface of the snow begins to form a thick, heavy crust. In April the river ice begins to break and the streams run with ice floes. The northern latitude of the area is associated with long days in summer. In late June and early July the sun rises at about 2:30 A.M. and sets about 10:30 P.M. Complete darkness is absent during this period. In winter long nights are the rule, the sun rising about 9:30 A.M. in December and setting at about 3:00 P.M. Because of its low position on the southern horizon, however, the winter sun is not warming.

The country, part of the circumpolar boreal forest belt, is marked by a predominance of coniferous flora. The principal species include red and black spruce and jack-pine; balsam

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137 occurs at the higher elevations. Along the rivers and creeks, as well as in the forest, there is a profusion of red willow. Also interspersed in the forest are patches of quaking aspen (locally called poplar), birch, and cottonwood. The area contains many edible berries, including the strawberry, soapberry, low and high bush cranberry, raspberry, and blueberry. Along dry sloughs there is often a profusion of coarse grass, while niggerheads are found in an occasional swamp.

136 Animal life is quite abundant. Represented are large game animals such as the moose, woodland caribou, sheep, and goat and fur-bearing mammals like the lynx, mink, wolverine, otter, fox, coyote, wolf, beaver, and marten. Deer are rare. In the high mountains gopher and groundhog are numerous. The ubiquitous red squirrel is heard chattering everywhere and the spruce forests are overrun with the small trails worn by the feet of the Arctic hare (locally called rabbit). Fish are generally abundant in the lakes, mainly lake trout, whitefish, and jackfish (or pike). In the rivers the principal species are trout, grayling (sometimes called bluefish), and sucker.

The mosquito is a plague until the middle of August; the small "no-see-um" becomes a nuisance at about the time when the mosquito disappears and remains until late October. The gray mouse is a household pest whose numbers foil any attempt at eradication. Birds include the robin, crow, hoot owl, whiskey jack (or Canada jay), and various winter species [825] like the grosbeak. There are also such fowl as the duck, goose, ptarmigan, willow grouse, and spruce hen. The two latter species are sometimes collectively referred to by the Indians as "chicken," although a distinction is recognized between them.

101 131 619 The name "Kaska" is the conventional term adopted by anthropologists to designate a number of linguistically and culturally related Athapaskan Indian bands or tribes living in the area of northern British Columbia, southern Yukon Territory, and Northwest Territories in Canada.[1] The present monograph is the result of work done with four of these tribes, but does not include the Espato-tena, who dwell in the Northwest Territories, east of the Rocky Mountains and are ethnographically unknown. The term Kaska is largely synonymous with the less satisfactory designation, Nahani, which, although formerly used by the Kaska to refer to neighboring Indian groups, is not employed as a term of reference within the society.

The four tribes under discussion are locally identified with particular geographical regions, which are in turn definable by the rivers and lakes constituting their main drainage channels. Except possibly in British Columbia, where trap lines are now formally registered, the boundaries between tribal units are not precisely recognized by the members of any tribe. Figure 2 shows the locations of the four Kaska tribes and their hunting and trapping districts, although only the second two listed below call themselves Kaska.

1. The Frances Lake Indians, the most northern tribe, live around Frances Lake, Simpson Lake, and the upper Frances River.[2] Their country extends from the Pelly River watershed on the northwest to the Mackenzie Mountains in the east.

[1] Osgood, *The Distribution of the Northern Athapaskan Indians* (1936), 13.

[2] The Albees on their walk up the Frances River in 1942 found the first signs of Frances Lake Indian camping grounds above the middle canyon of that stream. Albee and Albee, *Family Afoot in the Yukon Wilds* (1942) 614.

Habitat

The Tahltan claim very considerable area of country in the Cassiar district of British Columbia, the southern extremity of their territories touching latitude 56 and the northern extremity latitude 60. East and west their country extends from the Cascade to the Cassiar Range. The upper Stikine may be called the center of their territory. They control all the drainage basin of this river and only in a few places do they extend beyond to some of the neighboring feeders of the waters of the Taku, Nass, Skeena, Mackenzie and Yukon Rivers. 131

Characteristics of the Country

The region occupied by the Tahltan is of a semi-mountainous and semi-forested character. There are extensive areas of plateau and rolling country lightly timbered or for the most part open. As the timber line is low in this latitude and much of the country is equal in elevation to or above the timber line a great deal of country (all the higher parts) is almost devoid of timber. The lower plateaux and valleys are generally well timbered with trees of medium and small size - although nowhere growing thickly as on the Coast, nor is there anywhere much under brush as in the latter region. Many of the upper valleys are grassy or mossy in character and have very little timber. Moss is plentiful both in the open country and in the forests, and muskegs are often to be met with. The slopes of the hills and mountains, especially in the more easterly and westerly parts of the country, are often steep and rocky. The country as a whole shows much signs of erosion and in some places its nature is volcanic. The valley of the Stikine River, commencing immediately east of the Cascades for a distance of some forty miles, is drier than the rest of the country and resembles a good deal in appearance and flora some valleys further south in the Dry Belt of British Columbia. /To the/ west, in the Cascade or Coast mountains, where the Stikine and other streams pierce the range, the country assumes a different appearance, becoming very mountainous and rocky; glaciers and snow fields abound, and the lower valleys become gorge-like in character, with heavy timber and underbrush where the soil is not too rocky. Here the climate becomes cooler, and proceeding westwards the rainfall and snow fall become heavier and heavier. 133 137 133 134 [137] 132

132 However, very little of the Tahltan country lies within this wet belt. In the valley of the Lower Stikine the annual precipitation is estimated to be 100 inches or over, whilst in most parts of the Interior it probably does not exceed 15 to 25 inches. The southern part of the Tahltan country towards and around the head /waters/ of the Nass has more rainfall and snow fall than the northern and central parts and consequently this part of the country is on the whole more timbered. [37]

The extremes of temperature are great. It seems the greatest summer heat in the valleys is from 85 to 95F in different localities, depending a good deal on altitude, and in winter the greatest cold from 45 to 60 below zero F.

137 The principal trees are black pine, spruce (of two or three kinds,) balsam, willow, birch, alder and aspen. Hemlock, balsam, cedar and poplar are common in the valleys of the Cascades. Larch, Douglas fir and several kinds of pine so common in the Southern Interior are entirely wanting. Larch of some kind however is reported in certain localities further east in the Kaska country and elsewhere beyond the boundaries of the Tahltan, and cypress is reported to occur in the valley of the Iskut. (For a further description of the characteristics of the Tahltan country see Emmons pp. 9-11).

Tribal Boundaries

131 619 I spent considerable time with a number of informants trying to locate as correctly as possible the boundaries or approximate boundaries of the territories claimed by the Tahltan. Generally speaking, the Tahltan boundary on the west follows the axis of the Cascade or Coast Range, but the central part of the range is seldom penetrated except at a few points, as it is practically nothing but a sea of high rocky peaks and glaciers almost devoid of life. The lower eastern part of the range next /to/ the Interior plateau is the only portion really used by the Tahltan. There is a break in the general western boundary line of the Tahltan in the neighborhood of the Iskut and Stikine Rivers. Here the Tlingit claimed the river valleys on the Iskut to almost through the Cascade range, and on the Stikine to well beyond the range into the Interior to a point at least about or a little above Glenora, according to some informants,

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6: Honigmann E-5 (1943-1945)1954 ND12 Nahane ND12

132 sun. With the onset of evening the heat declines so that the nights are cool. Frosts begin in August. In winter periods of extreme cold occur but the season is relatively windless, a condition that helps to make the low temperatures bearable. In 1943–44 and again in January, 1947, the mercury is said to have approached 70 degrees below zero Fahrenheit. The winter of 1944–45 was described as relatively mild, the coldest day being about 55 degrees below zero.[7] The winter climate is greatly influenced by the Polar Continental air masses of the interior. When these cross the eastern mountains they bring the particular quality of cold which Indians describe as coming from the east or northeast. Snowfall is apt to be heavy, beginning in late September and remaining in the mountains until late June.

136 Like other parts of the North American taiga, the Cassiar remains well stocked with
● 137 game and fur bearers. The coniferous forest of spruce and jackpine, interspersed with dense clumps of willow, quaking aspen,[8] birch, and cottonwood (*liard*), proves hospitable to the fox, ground hog, gopher (marmot), lynx, mink, marten, otter, weasel, porcupine, muskrat, rabbit, red squirrel, wolf, coyote, mouse, and beaver. Amid the spruces the ground is covered with a luxuriant blanket of sphagnum moss attractive to caribou. Snakes are apparently absent, though not unfamiliar to the Indians. Patches of raspberry, saskatoon, strawberry, cranberries (low and high bush), and soap berry are inviting to grizzly, brown, and black bears. Jenness reports native traditions of buffalo
136 having been plentiful in the Kaska country during the precontact period.[9] Is he perhaps influenced by Indian tales of people running across huge "elephant" bones and teeth, probably belonging to some prehistoric species of dinosaur?[10] The available evidence indicates the range of wood buffalo to have been restricted to the east of the Fort Nelson River.[11] Various authors as well as local Indians agree that at some time in the past moose were lacking in the country. According to Pike, "twenty-five years ago there were few moose along the Liard, and the animal was unknown to the Indians hunting to the westward of Dease Lake. Then there began to be frequent rumours of a big track seen in the snow, and momentary glimpses of a beast whose size varied according to the fancy of the startled hunter. Then a young brave stood face to face with a moose and slew it; and the Cascas discovered that a new animal . . . had invaded their country."[12] George Adsit, a now deceased, long-term resident of the Cassiar, told the writer

[7] Personal communication. According to Pike, "the winters in the Cassiar are mild in comparison to the climate in the same latitude to the eastward of the Rockies, the warm Chinook winds from the Pacific penetrate the coast ranges, modifying the intensity of the cold to such an extent that there is usually a thaw with rainfall during some part of the winter." (Pike, *Through the Subarctic Forest* [1896], 99–100.) According to information personally received from George Adsit, long-term Cassiar resident, the Chinook does not blow until April and therefore has no effect on winter temperatures.

[8] This species of tree is especially found as a second growth in burned areas, where the raw hay or firewood also flourishes. For an interesting account of the latter plant, lately returned to London, England, after 300 years, see Vaskhencenter, *Flower of the Hills* (1946).

[9] Jenness, *Indians of Canada* (1932), 397.

[10] Sternberg, *Canadian Dinosaurs* (1945).

[11] Allen, *American Bisons* (1876).

[12] Pike, *Through the Subarctic Forest* (1896), 89. Williams also reports the former absence of moose in the Cassiar in his *Game Trails in British Columbia* (1925), 256.